

Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal: Life & Madhab

Imam Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Hanbal al-Shaibani, Abu ‘Abdullah, was conceived in Merv in current day Turkmenistan. His mother carried him in her womb, on route to Baghdad, where he was born in the year 164 AH. His father passed away when he was little more than years old, and thereafter he was raised by his mother.

Childhood

He was a distinguished child known for his piety, cleanliness and asceticism. Once, his uncle sent him with several documents containing information about some people to the Caliph's office. Ahmad took those papers and did not see his uncle for a long time. When his uncle eventually met him, he asked him about the documents and discovered that Ahmad – who was then a boy – did not deliver them. When asked why, Ahmad replied: "I wouldn't hand in those reports, and I have thrown them in the sea!" To this, his uncle replied: "This little boy fears Allah so much! What then of us?" Thus, Ahmad refused to act as an informant, even on behalf of his uncle, due to the fear of Allah that had been instilled in his heart from such a young age.

Youth and Education

He started his career by learning jurisprudence (Fiqh) under the celebrated Hanafi judge, Abu Yusuf, the renowned student and companion of Imam Abu Hanifah. He then discontinued his studies with Abu Yusuf, in the pursuit of Hadith, travelling around the Islamic Khilafa, at the tender age of 16. As a student, he was held in awe by his teachers, to the same degree that they would respect their own.. Ibn al-Jawzi states that Imam Ahmad had 414 Hadith masters whom he narrated from. Imam al-Shafi'i was from the most beloved of Ahmad's teachers, held in high esteem by him for his deep insight into jurisprudence. Al-Shafi'i equally admired Ahmad, for his expertise in jurisprudence and Hadith. He would often say to Imam Ahmad: "Tell us if you know of an authentic Hadeeth so that we may act on it." What demonstrates Imam Ahmad's love and admiration for al-Shafi'i is that when the latter would pass by him riding a mule, Imam Ahmad would follow al-Shafi'i on foot to enquire about various issues of jurisprudence. The great affectopm and regard between the two Imams is clearly reflected in the resemblance between the Shafi'i and Hanbali schools of jurisprudence.

Imam Ahmad did not suffice himself with seeking knowledge, but he also adorned it with actions, by making Jihad, performing the guard duty at Islamic frontiers (Ribat) and making Hajj five times in his life, twice on foot.

Expertise in Various Sciences

The Imam spent 40 years of his life in the pursuit of knowledge, and only thereafter did he assume the position of a Mufti. By this time, Imam Ahmad had become a leading authority in six or seven Islamic disciplines, according to al-Shafi'i.

Imam Ahmad became – unquestionably – a leading authority in Hadith, and left a colossal Hadith encyclopaedia, al-Musnad, as a living proof of his proficiency and devotion to this science. He is also remembered as a leading and the most balanced critic of Hadith (Naqid) of his time.

Imam Ahmad became a principal specialist in jurisprudence, since he had the advantage of benefiting from some of the famous early jurists and their heritage, such as Abu Hanifah, Malik, al-Shafi'i and many others. Imam Ahmad further improvised and developed upon previous schools, such that he became the founder of a new independent school, that was to be attributed to him as the Hanbali school. Some scholars, such as Qutaiba b. Sa'id noted that if Ahmad were to witness the age of Sufyan al-Thawri, Malik, al-Awza'i and Laith b. Sa'd, he would have surpassed them all.

Imam Ahmad, despite being bilingual, became an expert in the Arabic language, poetry, grammar. He gave great importance to the Arabic language, the proper application of grammar and correct pronunciation, such that he would often discipline his daughter for making a grammatical error in her everyday speech.

Imam Ahmad established himself as the Imam in the sciences of Quran, authoring works in exegesis (Tafsir), science of abrogation (al-Nasikh wal-Mansukh), as well as the different modes recitations (Qira'at), preferring some modes of recitation over others, and even expressing dislike for the recitation of Hamza due to its exaggerated elongation of vowels.

Imam Ahmad notably evolved into the most celebrated theologian, to be known as the 'Imam Ahl al-Sunnah', the leading authority on the Orthodox doctrine. Imam Ahmad personified the theological views of the early orthodox scholars, and in particular, the founders of the three juristic schools before him, Hanafi, Maliki and al-Shafi'i. This proved to be historically significant, since the Hanbali doctrine remained the only school representing the views of the founders of the other three juristic schools, that later became dominated by Ash'arites or the Maturidis. What also gained him a resounding reputation was his vigorous refusal to accept the dogma of the 'creation of the Quran', in spite of going through a protracted, arduous period of severe persecution. He is often likened to Abu Bakr, as the lone champion of Islam during the wars of apostasy.

Imam Ahmad was equally considered to be a leading example in Zuhd (material and spiritual asceticism), for he lived a very simple life, detached from worldly pleasures. His work on Zuhd (Kitab al-Zuhd) is regarded to be the most profound contribution to the Islamic heritage. Abu Dawud, the famous compiler of Sunan, observed that sessions with Ahmad were sessions devoted to the Hereafter, for he would never mention anything of this world.

Ahmad's Five Basic Juristic Principles

Despite being an exceptional jurist, Imam Ahmad detested that his opinions be written and compiled, fearing that it may swerve his students away from studying the sources of Law, the Quran and the Sunnah. Yet, as Ibn al-Jawzi comments, Allah knew the sincerity in his heart and raised around him faithful students who would record his opinions, such that an independent school of jurisprudence and theology was formed and attributed to Imam Ahmad.

Imam Ahmad employed exceptional caution while formulating juristic opinions and issuing verdicts, and would frequently warn his students of speaking in a matter in which you have no reputable predecessor. This prudent attitude is clearly demonstrated in the thought process applied by Ahmad in extrapolation of laws from the divine sources, which is as follows:

1) Divine text (Nass) from the Quran and the Sunnah was the first point of reference for all scholars of jurisprudence, and in this, Ahmad was not an exception. Whenever he noticed a divine textual evidence for an issue, he never referred to other sources, opinions of the Companions, scholars or resorted to analogical deduction (Qiyas).

2) Verdicts issued by the Companions were resorted to when no textual evidence was found in the Quran or the Sunnah. The reasons for ranking the verdicts of the Companions after the Quran and the Sunnah are obvious: The Companions witnessed the revelation of the Quran, and its implementation by the Prophet – Sallallahu ‘alaihi wa-sallam, who advised the Ummah to adhere to the rightly-guided caliphs, hence, the Companions ought to have a better understanding than the latter generations.

Imam Ahmad, would likewise, never give precedence to a scholarly opinion or analogical deduction (Qiyas) over that of the Companions', to the extent that if they were divided into two camps over an issue, two different narrations would similarly be documented from Imam Ahmad.

3) In a case where the Companions differed, he preferred the opinion supported by the divine texts (Nass).

4) In instances where none of the above was applicable, Ahmad would resort to the Mursal Hadith (with a link missing between the Successor and the Prophet – Sallallahu ‘alaihi wa-sallam) or a weak Hadith. However, the type of weak Hadith that Ahmad relied on was such that it may be regarded as ‘fair’ Hadith due to other evidences (Hasan li Ghairihi), not the type that is deemed very weak and thus unsuitable as an evidence for Law. This was due to the fact that, during his time, the Hadith was only categorised into ‘sound’ (Sahih) and ‘weak’ (Dha’if). It was only after Ahmad, that al-Tirmidhi introduced a third category of ‘fair’ (Hasan).

5) Only after having exhausted the aforementioned sources would Imam Ahmad employ analogical deduction (Qiyas) due to necessity, and with utmost care.

Ahmad’s doctrine

As demonstrated previously, Imam Ahmad became the leading authority on the Orthodox doctrine of Islam, which represented the first three blessed generations of Islam, untainted with foreign dogmas. Ahmad’s doctrinal influence can be measured by the fact that, out of the four traditional schools, the Hanbali school alone maintained its own theological view, unlike the Hanafi school which adopted the Maturidi doctrine, or the Shafi’i and Maliki schools that adopted the Ash’ari doctrine. The secret for this was the depth and length at which Ahmad spoke in matters of theology, due to the prevailing unorthodoxy in his age, headed by the Mu’tazilites. Due to this it is noted that there have been, in comparison to other schools, very few Hanbalis who inclined towards unorthodox views, for the copious volume of narrations from Imam Ahmad dealing with specific issues of doctrine made it extremely difficult for his followers to adhere to any other, yet still remain faithful followers.

Imam Ahmad’s doctrine could be summarised as follows:

1) He would believe in the description that Allah gave to himself in the Quran, or inspired the Prophet with, and affirm them at their face value (Dhahir), while generally negating any resemblance between the Creator and the creation.

2) He would vigorously reject negative theology (Ta’til), as well as allegorical exegesis (Ta’wil), with respect to belief in Allah, which was heavily employed by the Jahmites, Mu’tazilites and the Kullabites (later to be known as the Ash’arites) to justify their philosophical approach to God.

3) He believed that Allah Speaks with letters and sound, for he believed every word and letter of the Quran to be the word of Allah, contrary to the Kullabites, who, in their opposition to the Mu’tazilites, affirmed eternal Speech for Allah, yet

still agreed with them in that they believed that the Quran, which is composed of letters, was created.

4) He believed that Allah literally Hears and Sees; that He has two Hands with which He created Adam; that Allah has a Face

5) He believed that Allah literally Rose over the Throne after Creating the heavens and the Earth in six days.

6) He believed that Allah is High above and distinct from His creation

7) He believed that Allah is all Knowing, All Wise, All Power and All Able, and that Allah has His own Will, He Does what He likes out of His Wisdom. Whatever Allah has Written and Decreed upon His creation, must come to pass. Nothing leaves His knowledge, or happens without His Permission or Will.

8) He believed that Allah becomes Pleased when obeyed and Displeased when disobeyed.

9) He would regard the Jahmiyah (followers of al-Jahm ibn Safwan), and the Rafidha (the Imami Shias) who curse the Companions, to be disbelievers (Kuffar).

10) He held that the sinners amongst the Muslims are under the threat of Allah's punishment; that if He wishes He may Punish them or Forgive them; Contrary to the Khawarij. He would not declare a Muslim to be a disbeliever (Kafir) on account of his sins, nor would he exclude actions from Iman unlike the Murjia. Once he was asked about those who declare their belief in the five pillars of Islam, yet refuse to perform them; he said, in reply, they are disbelievers (Kuffar).

11) He believed in the miracles that occurred at the hands of the Awliya (pious Muslims) as a favour from Allah.

12) He believed that Abu Bakr is the best of the Companions, followed by Umar, then the six companions chosen by the latter as Ashab al-Shura (members of Shura council): Uthman, Ali, al-Zubair, Talha, 'Abd al-Rahman b. 'Awf and Sa'd b. Abi Waqqas; followed by the fighters of Badr from the Emigrants (Muhajirin) and then the Helpers (Ansar).

13) He prohibited discussions on the differences between the Companions or dislike of any of them; for the honour of Companionship with the Prophet – SallAllahu 'alaihi wa-sallam – is sufficient a virtue to rank them higher than the entire Muslim Ummah until the end of time.

The Trial

Imam Ahmad is remembered as a legendary figure in the Islamic history for his uncompromising stance and for withstanding immense pressure during the trial of 'the creation of the Quran'. The Caliph at the time, Ma'mun, subjected the scholars to severe persecution, at the behest of the Mu'tazilite theologians who attributed themselves to Imam Abu Hanifa in jurisprudence. The Mu'tazilites were a heretical Muslim sect, who sanctified their intelligence above the revelation and espoused the belief that, even though, the Quran is the speech of Allah, He created that speech as a distinct entity and called it 'the Quran'. This was in opposition to the orthodox belief that Allah spoke every word of the Quran, and indeed: 'Allah spoke to Moses directly', as Allah states in the Quran.

The Mu'tazilites were discredited throughout the Umayyad rule and never given the position of prominence and influence, until the Caliph al-Ma'mun came to power, during the 'Abbasids, who took them into confidence and bestowed them with official positions within the state as judges. Bishr al-Marrisi and Ahmad b. Abi Du'ad were the two important figures behind the Mu'tazilite inquisition, which systematically placed many jurists and traditionists on trial until they were forced to acknowledge that the Quran is created, and their acknowledgement publicised in all major cities.

Nearly all the scholars of Baghdad from the jurists and the traditionists were tested, and all of them acknowledged the doctrine of the created Quran, with the exception of the two; Ahmad b. Hanbal and Muhammad b. Nuh. This greatly pained and angered Imam Ahmad, such that he boycotted some of the great traditionists for their acknowledgement, and often refused to narrate from them. Amongst those boycotted were a close companion and a colleague of Imam Ahmad, Yahya b. Ma'in, about whom, it is said that Imam Ahmad refused to speak to him until he died and composed the following lines of poetry censuring his acknowledgement of heresy:

Ya ibn al-madini al-ladhi 'uridat lahu

Dunya fa Jada bi dinihi li yanalaha

Madha da'aka li intihali maqalatin

Kunta taz'umu kafiran man qalaha

O Ibn al-Madini, to whom the world was offered,

So he strove to attain it at the expense of his religion

What made you embrace a dogma (about which)

You would impute disbelief on the one who adopts it!

Finally, Ahmad b. Hanbal and Muhammad b. Nuh were also put to the test on the order of al-Ma'mun, but they refused to acknowledge the creation of the Quran. Consequently, they were despatched in irons to be dealt with by al-Ma'mun himself. On the way, Imam Ahmad supplicated to Allah to prevent him from meeting al-Ma'mun. His prayer was answered in the sudden death of al-Ma'mun due to which they were both sent back. Muhammad b. Nuh passed away on their return journey, and there was none to prepare his funeral, pray over, and bury him, except Imam Ahmad.

He remained imprisoned in Baghdad until al-Mu'tasim assumed power. Al-Mu'tasim, unlike al-Ma'mun, was a destitute to knowledge. Nevertheless, he continued the Mu'tazilite inquisition as explicitly requested by al-Ma'mun in his will. His rule was perhaps the most brutal towards Sunni scholars in general, and Imam Ahmad in particular who intransigently continued to resist all attempts by the authorities to force him to acknowledge the creation of the Quran. The frustrated Caliph finally ordered Ahmad to be flogged in public, which resulted in Ahmad falling unconscious. Imam Ahmad was released shortly afterwards, when al-Mu'tasim feared that the commotion caused in Baghdad due to mistreatment of Ahmad may reach an uncontrollable pitch.

After al-Mu'tasim's death, al-Wathiq took over the office of Khilafa, and ordered his loyal Mu'tazili judge in Egypt, Ibn Abi al-Layth to press hard with the inquisition. This caused many to flee from Egypt, while the prisons became full of jurists and traditionists who resisted the government demands. In Baghdad, however, the general public had become enraged over the policies of the government, which made it difficult for al-Wathiq to pursue the inquisition with the same vigour. He therefore, instead of re-imprisoning Imam Ahmad, resolved on banishing him from Baghdad, saying: "Do not live with me on this earth!", and henceforth, Ahmad b. Hanbal went into hiding.

Towards the end of al-Wathiq's reign, a close student of al-Shafi'i, Ahmad b. Nasr al-Khaza'i was caught by the officials and charged for organising an uprising in Baghdad. When Ahmad al-Khaza'i was brought to al-Wathiq in chains, the latter, instead of asking him about his role in the uprising, questioned him about his belief in the creation of the Quran, to which Ahmad al-Khaza'i gave the standard Sunni reply. The enraged Caliph, upon hearing his response, personally decapitated him. His head remained in Baghdad, while his body remained on a crucifix in Samurra for six years, as a grisly warning to potential rebels.

After al-Wathiq's death, his brother al-Mutawakkil took charge of the office. Al-Mutawakkil, unlike his predecessors had the utmost respect and admiration for the Sunni school, and through him, Allah decided to put an end to the inquisition. Promptly after assuming the position as Caliph, he sent orders throughout the Khilafa to put an immediate end to all discussions regarding the Quran, released all the prisoners of faith, dismissed the Mu'tazili judges, and more significantly deported the chief instigator of the inquisition, Ahmad b. Abi Du'ad along with his family. He further ordered that the Mu'tazili judges responsible for the inquisition be cursed from by the pulpits, by name.

Al-Mutawakkil, on the other hand, showed his utmost reverence to the Sunni hero of the inquisition, Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal, and wished to take care of all his affairs. Ahmad, however, turned down the offers due to his general dislike of being close to the rulers. Al-Mutawakkil, knowing that Imam Ahmad would refuse his offerings, instead presented some gifts to his son, Salih b. Ahmad. When it came to his knowledge, Imam Ahmad showed strong disapproval and refused to consume anything from his son's wealth.

Illness, Death and Funeral

After Imam Ahmad turned 77, he was struck with severe illness and fever, and became very weak, yet never complaining about his infirmity and pain until he died. In spite of his debilitation, he would urge his son, Salih b. Ahmad, to help him stand up for prayer. When he was unable to stand, he would pray sitting, or sometimes lying on his side. After hearing of his illness, the masses flocked to his door. The ruling family also showed the desire to pay him a visit, and to this end sought his permission. However, due to his desire to remain independent of any influence from the authority, Ahmad denied them access.

Once during his illness, an old man entered upon Imam Ahmad and reminded him of his account before Allah, to which Imam Ahmad began to weep profusely. On another occasion, a man who partook in the beatings inflicted on Imam Ahmad, came to Salih b. Ahmad, the son of the Imam, and begged him to seek permission from his father to allow him to enter, for he felt the guilt of his involvement in the suffering of the Imam. When he was finally given permission, he entered upon the Imam and wept, begging for his forgiveness. Imam Ahmad forgave him on the condition that he would never repeat his actions. The man left the Imam, and all those present, in tears.

'Abdullah b. Ahmad b. Hanbal narrates, that while Imam Ahmad was on his death bed, he kept drifting in and out of consciousness, and gesturing with his hands saying: 'No... No... No...' When enquired about it, Ahmad replied: 'The Devil

was standing near me, trying his hardest to mislead me, saying: ‘Come on, Ahmad!’, and I was replying back: ‘No... No...’

On Friday, the 12 of Rabi' al-Awwal 241 AH, the legendary Imam breathed his last. The news of his death quickly spread far and wide in the city and the people flooded the streets to attend Ahmad's funeral. One of the rulers, upon hearing the news, sent burial shrouds along with perfumes to be used for Ahmad's funeral. However, respecting the Ahmad's wishes, his sons refused the offering and instead used a burial shroud prepared by his female servant. Moreover, his sons took care not to use water from their homes to wash Imam Ahmad as he had refused to utilise any of their resources, for accepting the offerings of the ruler.

After preparing his funeral, his sons prayed over him, along with around 200 members of the ruling family, while the streets were teeming with both men and women, awaiting the funeral procession. Imam Ahmad's funeral was then brought out and the multitudes continued to pray over him in the desert, before and after his burial at his grave.

During the trial of Imam Ahmad, he would often say: “Say to the heretics, the decisive factor between us and you is the day of funerals”; meaning, the adherents to the orthodox doctrine always have a good end, for they earn the love of Allah, as well as the affection of the multitudes, and their death has a great impact on people's lives. This is exactly what took place in this instance, for it is estimated that about 1 300 000 people attended his funeral. One of the scholars said in relation to this that such a massive attendance at a funeral has never been equalled in the history of the Arabs, neither in the pre-Islamic era (Jahiliyah) nor in Islam. The masses were engulfed in the genuine popular emotion, while the scene of his grave became overwhelmed by such sentiments that the graveyard had to be guarded by the civil authorities.

Another scholar relates that when he attended the funeral of Ahmad, he wanted pray over him at his grave. But the crowds were so awe-inspiring that he didn't reach the grave until after a week. The funerals of the famous opponents of Imam Ahmad, however, were in stark contrast, which were not attended by more than a handful. The funeral procession of the Ahmad ibn Abi Du'ad – the chief instigator of the inquisition – went largely unnoticed, with none willing to carry his funeral to the graveyard, except a few from the ruling family. Such was also the case with al-Harith al-Muhasibi – a theologian and an ascetic – who, despite being a bitter enemy of the Mu'tazilites, was still discredited by Imam Ahmad for his interests in Kalam (speculative theology). Only three or four people prayed over al-Muhasibi, and a similar fate met Bishr al-Mirrasi.

In the Islamic history, Ahmad's funeral is noted as the day when the Mu'tazilite doctrine was brought to a decisive and a humiliating end, whilst the Sunni Islam and the Prophetic guidance were the order of the day. Ahmad's death had proven the ineffectiveness of the Caliph's role in defining Islam, and further unquestionably acknowledged that it were the scholars, rather than the Caliphs, who were the true 'inheritors of the Prophets'. Ahmad's funeral was marked by the multitudes flocking, and openly cursing al-Karabisi and al-Marrisi, the chief heretics. This became a frequent practise amongst the subsequent Hanbali funerals throughout Islamic history, where the masses would rally behind prominent Hanbali funerals proclaiming: This day is for Sunnis and Hanbalis! Not Jahmis, Mu'tazilis or Ash'aris!

The Madhab of Imam Ahmad

After the death of Imam Ahmad, his students travelled across the Muslim world along with the responsa (Masa'il) of Ahmad concerning theology, jurisprudence and traditions. From the foremost of his students are: his two sons, Salih and Abdullah, Hanbal ibn Ishaq, al-Marrudhi, al-Kawsaj, Ibn Hani, Abu Dawud (compiler of Sunan Abi Dawud), al-Athram, Abu Zur'ah al-Razi, Abu Hatim al-Razi, 'Abdul-Wahhab al-Warraqa, al-Tirmidhi and many others.

However, it was not until al-Khallal travelled the Muslim world, collecting the responsa of Imam Ahmad from his students scattered across the Khilafa, that the Madhab of Imam Ahmad was compiled in an organised form. This vast compilation became known as al-Jami', which is still used in the 8th Islamic century by Ibn Taymiyah and his contemporary Hanbali jurists.

This collection was then summarised into a short treatise on the Fiqh of Imam Ahmad by the Baghdadi-Hanbali jurist al-Khiraqi, which became known as Mukhtasar al-Khiraqi. This treatise was the first Fiqh manual ever written in the Madhab, and its first ever commentary was also written by its very author, thus, making al-Khiraqi the first author of a Fiqh manual in the Madhab, the first one to write a commentary on a manual, and indeed the first Hanbali to comment on his own manual.

The summarised treatise on Fiqh by al-Khiraqi proved to be the most important contribution to Hanbali Fiqh, with over 300 commentaries, according to Yusuf b. 'Abd al-Hadi, which even today remains an excellent introductory manual to the Hanbali school of jurisprudence. The famous commentaries to al-Mukhtasari include, but are not restricted to: a commentary by Ibn Hamid, then al-Qadhi Abu Ya'la, then Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi, whose commentary, famously known as al-Mughni, is considered to be a timeless masterpiece.

Hanbali Books on Theology

Since Hanbalism is as much a school of theology as it is a school of Law, the Hanbali theologians have contributed several works, at various intervals in history, representing the doctrine of Ahmad b. Hanbal. Imam Ahmad himself played a leading role in authoring books on doctrine, such as the Kitab al-Sunnah (Book of Sunnah) and al-Rad 'Ala al-Zanadiqah wa al-Jahmiyah (The refutation of the Heretics and the Jahmis). Apart from these two works, Imam Ahmad wrote several letters addressed to some of his contemporaries, explaining the orthodox creed, found in the Tabaqat of Ibn Abi Ya'la, although not all of the letters are authentic.

Subsequently, the students of Ahmad in particular, and the rest of his followers, continued to contribute works in theology. Several Hanbalis authored books, in the footsteps of their Imam, with a common title: Kitab al-Sunnah, such as al-Athram, 'Abdullah (the son of Imam Ahmad), Hanbal ibn Ishaq (the cousin of Imam Ahmad), al-Khallal.

Some of the important manuals on doctrine accepted by the mainstream Hanbalis include: Lum'at al-I'tiqad by Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi, al-I'tiqad by al-Qadhi Abu Ya'la, al-Iqtisad fi al-I'tiqad by 'Abd al-Ghani al-Maqdisi, and various treatise written by Ibn Taymiyah, such as al-Wasitiyah and al-Tadmuriyah, as well as his close student Ibn al-Qayyim, such as his famous Nuniyah, an ode rhyming in the letter Nun.

It is worthy to note that many works on theology by some Hanbalis were reactionary to the Hanbali-Ash'ari feud, such as al-Radd 'Ala al-Asha'irah (Rebuttal of the Ash'arites) by Ibn al-Hanbali, and by Abul-Wafa Ibn 'Aqil with the same title. Another example of such work is Ibtal al-Ta'wilat li Akhbar al-Sifat (Negation of the Allegorical Interpretations of the Traditions Pertaining to Divine Attributes) by al-Qadhi Abu Ya'la, which came is a rebuttal of the book Mushkil al-Hadith wa Bayanuhu (The Problematic Traditions and their Interpretations) by Ibn Furak, the Ash'ari theologian and a traditionist, who compiled the aforementioned book, giving allegorical interpretations to divine texts that seemed problematic according to Ash'ari principles; and al-Munadhara fi al-Quran ma'a Ahl al-Bid'ah (The Debate Regarding the Quran with Some Heretics), by the great Hanbali jurist, Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi, where he relates his violent discourse with his contemporaries from the Ash'aris, whom he refers to as 'Heretics', about the nature of the Quran contained in a book-form (Mushaf), whether it is created or uncreated.

Other Hanbalis, although they did not author books dedicated to doctrine, they did, however, include sections of doctrine in books of Fiqh and Suluk (ethics). Al-Ghunya, by Abdul-Qadir al-Jilani – a famous Hanbali jurist and the founder of the

Qadiri Sufi order – is for the most part, a manual in ethics and morality, yet it begins with a thorough presentation of the Hanbali doctrine, which paints al-Jilani as an ardent follower of the mainstream Hanbalism, and an avowed antagonist of the Ash'aris.

Hanbali Books on Fiqh

The first manual in Fiqh, as mentioned earlier was the famous al-Mukhtasar by al-Khiraqi, which has remained up until this day, from the most important introductory works on Hanbali Fiqh, with its commentary par excellence, al-Mughani by Ibn Qudama.

Al-Majd Ibn Taymiyah, who was the grandfather of the famous Hanbali theologian and jurist, Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyah, was considered to be one of the great authorities in the school, along with Ibn Qudama, such that if the two Sheikhs agreed upon an issue, it would be considered the reliable opinion (mu'tamad) in the school. Al-Majd Ibn Taymiyah authored his famous and reliable Fiqh manual called al-Muharrar fi al-Fiqh.

Ibn Qudama played a key role in developing a Hanbali curriculum of Fiqh for all levels of students. He wrote a preparatory manual for the beginners called al-'Umdah, with the objective of developing an all-round surface understanding of jurisprudence, without confusing the student with difference of opinion within the school. For the students at an intermediate level, he authored al-Muqni', aimed at training the students at exercising preference (tarjih) upon conflicting opinions (ta'arudh) within the school. For the next level, he authored al-Kafi, with the goal of acquainting the student with the sources of the Law, and the methodology for extrapolating rules from the revelation. Al-Mughni (lit. rich), which is a commentary on al-Mukhtasar by al-Khiraqi, was compiled for the advanced students, to familiarise them with the difference of opinion and the respective arguments, beyond the school, even surpassing the four traditional schools.

The aforementioned book, al-Muqni' by Ibn Qudama had received two main important commentaries: al-Sharh al-Kabir (the Great Commentary) by al-Muwaffaq Ibn Qudama's nephew, Shams al-Din Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi; and al-Insaf by the famous Hanbali jurist and judge, 'Ala al-Din al-Mardawi. These two commentaries have remained popular amongst post-Ibn Qudama generations up until today.

Al-Muqni', also has a very popular abridgment by the famous Hanbali jurist Sharf al-Din Abu al-Naja al-Hajjawi called: Zad al-Mustaqni' fi Ikhtisar al-Muqni'. This abridgement became particularly famous amongst the Hanbalis from Najd, where it is regarded as the primer to the Madhab. The most common and widely accepted

commentary on Zad was written by the Egyptian Hanbali jurist, Mansur b. Yunus al-Buhuti called: al-Rawdh al-Murbi', which was further commented on by the Najdi-Hanbali jurist, 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhammad b. Qasim. The latter commentary, which is informally known as Hashiyat Ibn Qasim is regarded to be one of the greatest contributions to the school in the modern times. Another invaluable contribution to the school has been al-Sharh al-Mumti' 'Ala Zad al-Mustaqni', by the famous and profound Hanbali jurist, theologian, traditionist, linguist and a grammarian, Muhammad b. Salih al-'Uthaimin. Al-Sharh al-Mumti', originally, was delivered as a series of lectures over the years, which was then written, compiled and then published by his loyal students into volumes.

The aforementioned author of Zad al-Mustaqni' – al-Hajjawi, is also the author of al-Iqna' which serves today as a major reference work for verdicts (Ifta) in Saudi Arabia, along with Muntaha al-Iradat by al-Futuhi. Both of these voluminous manuals have been commented on by several authors. The most famous of those commentaries are Kashaf al-Qina' 'An Matn al-Iqna', which is a commentary on al-Iqna', and Sharh Muntaha al-Iradat, both by al-Buhuti.

Notable Hanbali Scholars

Many celebrated personalities in the Islamic history received their tutelage in the Hanbali school, in Baghdad, Greater Syria (Sham), Egypt and finally the Arabian Peninsula. The following is a very humble list comprising of some of the notable Hanbalis – bar the direct students of Imam Ahmad:

- **Al-Khallal** (d. 311) – A student of some of the closest companions and students of Imam Ahmad. He is remembered and honoured for collecting the responsa of Imam Ahmad from his students, who were scattered across the Muslim world.
- **al-Khiraqi** (d. 334) – (who summarised Jami' al-Khallal into a Fiqh manual, the mother of all Fiqh manuals in the Madhab)
- **Ghulam al-Khallal** (d. 363) – A servant and a devout student of al-Khallal, and author of many works in various sciences. It is reported that, days before his death, in his illness, he said to his companions: I am with you until this Friday. Upon being asked why, he said: al-Khallal informed me from Abu Bakr al-Marrudhi that Ahmad lived until he was 78 and died on Friday. Abu Bakr al-Marrudhi lived until he was 78 and died on Friday. Al-Khallal lived until he was 78 and died on Friday. On Friday, Ghulam al-Khallal breathed his last when he was 78.
- **Ibn Hamid** (d. 403) – He was a leading authority on the Hanbali school in his time, and known for his frequent performance of Hajj, such that he died on his way back from Makkah. He is regarded to be the last of the early class (Tabaqa) of the Hanbalis.

- **al-Qadhi Abu Ya'la** (d. 458) – He was born to a Hanafi family, but became a Hanbali after studying under Ibn Hamid. He became the leading authority on the school after Ibn Hamid, who is remembered for spreading the Madhab far and wide. His Hadith assemblies were very popular and attended by thousands of Traditionists, where he would sit on the chair of ‘Abdullah b. Ahmad b. Hanbal and narrate Hadith.
- **Abu al-Khattab** (d. 510) – A devout student of al-Qadhi Abu Ya'la, and author of many works in the Madhab, the most important of them: al-Intisar authored as a defence to various Hanbali juristic opinions in comparison to other schools. His students included many prominent Hanbali figures, such as ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jailani.
- **Abu Isma'il al-Harawi** (d. 481) – A celebrated Hanbali jurist and a theologian, known for his awe-inspiring personality, and ardent enmity towards the Ash'arites. He was one of the great Sufi figures in the history, who authored Manazil al-Sa'irin – a manual in Tasawwuf – which was later expounded by Ibn al-Qayyim in Madarij al-Salikin. He was a fearless defender of the Hanbali faith such that he would often say:

Ana Hanbaliyun Mahaiyytu fa in amut

Fa wasiyati li al-Nasi an yatahanbalu

I am a Hanbali as long as I live, and when I die

My legacy to the people is to become Hanbalis

- **Abul-Wafa ‘Ali ibn ‘Aqil** (d. 488) – One of the most intelligent jurists the Hanbalis ever had within their ranks. He was, in his youth, influenced by the Mu'tazlites and showed admiration for al-Hallaj (a pantheist who pretended to be a Muslim), but soon repented and wrote various rebuttals against the Mu'tazlites and the Ash'arites. Ibn al-Jawzi relates that Ibn ‘Aqil once said: I say with utmost certainty that the Companions died having no knowledge of the atoms (Jawhar) or accidents (‘Aradh). Hence, if you feel that you should be like them, then be! But, if you think that the way of the Doctors of Kalam is better than the way of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar, then how evil is what you think! He left behind many works, amongst them voluminous al-Funun, of which only a small portion is found today.
- **‘Abdul-Qadir al-Jailani** (d. 561) A Hanbali theologian, great preacher and, perhaps the most influential Sufi figure who founded the Qadiriyyah way (Tariqa). Although, his life is regarded as a chain of miracles, so much has been claimed about his ‘sainthood’ by his passionate Sufi followers that very little of his biographical accounts can be verified. The only book one

can attribute to al-Jailani with a level of surety is al-Ghunya, in which he spells out his strict adherence to the Hanbali dogma and Law.

- **Ibn al-Jawzi** (d. 597) A famous jurist, exegete, critic, preacher and a prolific author, with works on all subjects. He began his preaching career at a very young age and gained popularity amongst the masses. Although, he never met Ibn 'Aqil, he did receive a fair amount of tutelage from his books, which left him perplexed about the orthodox doctrine of the Hanbali school; as reflected in his theological opinions that are often contradictory, and at times leaning towards allegorical exegesis (ta'wil) conflicting with the mainstream Hanbali position. His works in theology, thereafter, were criticised by the mainstream theologians of the Madhab, such as Ibn Qudama.
- **Ibn Qudama al-Maqdisi** (d. 620) One of the major Hanbali authorities and the author of the profound and voluminous book on Law, al-Mughni, which became popular amongst researchers from all juristic backgrounds. He was also an authority on Hanbali doctrine and a passionate opponent of the Ash'arites, but that did not prevent him from joining the military campaign of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, who was an Ash'ari, against the Crusaders in Palestine.
- **Majd al-Din Ibn Taymiyah** (d. 653) A great jurist, traditionist, grammarian and exegete of Harran. He was the grandfather of the celebrated Sheikh al-Islam Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyah. The well-known grammarian and the author of Alfiya, Ibn Malik would hold al-Majd in high regard. He also enjoyed an esteemed position in the Hanbali school, as the term 'The Two Sheikhs' (Sheikhan) would only refer to him and Ibn Qudama.
- **Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyah** (d. 728) – A legendary figure in the Islamic history, known by his friends and foes for his expertise in all Islamic sciences. Aside from being a celebrated scholar, he also gained much prominence due to his fearlessness, zealous activism, political and military campaigns in Damascus against the invading Tatar. Ibn Nasir al-Din al-Dimashqi in his book al-Radd al-Wafir mentions 87 scholars from all schools who referred to Ibn Taymiya as 'Sheikh al-Islam', a prestigious title given only to jurists and traditionists whose verdicts reached a high level of fame and acceptance. His fame also earned him many envious enemies who continued to conspire against him, until he was imprisoned in the citadel of Damascus and died therein. His funeral was attended by a mammoth number of inhabitants of Damascus, while the funeral prayer in absentia was prayed over him throughout the Islamic world. He is remembered for his invaluable contributions, not only to the Hanbali school of jurisprudence and theology, but also to the rich Islamic heritage. He also produced many students of high calibre. Names such as Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Dhahabi and Ibn Kathir are but some of his virtues.

- **Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya** (d. 751) – The closest companion and a student of Ibn Taymiyah who shared with him the moments of ease and hardship, until the latter's death in the citadel. His works in various Islamic sciences earned him much acceptance and fame. Some of his important works include *Zaad al-Ma'ad* in Seerah and Fiqh, *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in* in Usul al-Fiqh, and *al-Kafiyah fil-Intisar lil-Firqat al-Najiyah*, an ode rhyming in the letter Nun on Hanbali theology, which is taught and studied in Hanbali schools until today.
- **Ahmad ibn 'Abdil-Hadi** (d. 744) – A devout and close student of Ibn Taymiyah and an expert traditionist. He wrote at length the legendary accounts of his beloved teacher Ibn Taymiyah. He is also the author of *al-Sarim al-Munki fi al-Radd 'Ala al-Subki*, a violent rebuttal of al-Subki's attempt to justify taking long journeys for the visitation of the Prophet's grave. Unfortunately, he died before completing this book at the age of forty.
- **Najm al-Din al-Tufi** (d. 716) – The author of several important works, such as the summarisation of *Rawdat al-Nadhir* by Ibn Qudama, also known as *al-Bulbul*, widely taught until today. In spite of being a Hanbali in Fiqh, he would often refer to himself as an Ash'arite and extreme Shi'ite. He was chastised in public and imprisoned several times for his unorthodox views. Although, his repentance is reported; however, Ibn Rajab doubted the sincerity of his repentance.
- **Shams al-Din b. Muflih** (d. 763) – One of the leading authorities in Hanbali Law who received his tutelage amongst several prominent Hanbali figures, including Ibn Taymiyah. He gave particular attention to the juristic preferences of Ibn Taymiyah, and included them in his voluminous and renowned masterpiece on Hanbali jurisprudence known as *al-Furu'*.
- **Ahmad b. Qadhi al-Jabal** (d. 771) – A chief judge and a devout student of Ibn Taymiyah. He is regarded to be the leading Hanbali poet of his time. He would often recite the following:

Nabiyi Ahmad wa Kadha Imami

wa Sheikhi Ahmad Ka al-Bahri Tami

wa ismi Ahmad Li Dhaka Arju

Shafa'ata Ashrafi al-Rusul al-Kirami

My Prophet is Ahmad, and so is my Imam

My Sheikh, Ahmad (b. Taymiya), is like an ocean abundant with knowledge

My name is Ahmad and henceforth I wish for

The intercession of the most noble of the Messengers

- **Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali** (d. 795) – A prominent jurist, traditionist, ascetic and preacher, who authored several important works, largely commenting upon famous collections of traditions, such as al-Tarmidhi, al-Bukhari and the forty Hadith of al-Nawawi. His teachers include Ibn al-Qayyim, under whom he learnt his famous Hanbali ode al-Kafiyah.
- **‘Ala al-Din Al-Mardawi** (d. 885) – A chief judge and one of the foremost specialists in the Madhab amongst the latter Hanbali generations. He is the author of al-Insaf, a rich commentary on al-Muqni’ of Ibn Qudama, where he lists the variance of opinion, then declares the correct position in the school.
- **Sharaf al-Din Al-Hajjawi** (d. 968) A distinguished figure amongst the latter Damascan Hanbali scholars, and the author of two important manuals that were to remain the basis for verdicts amongst the Hanbalis until today: Zad al-Mustaqni’, a summarisation of al-Muqni’; and al-Iqna’.
- **Ibn al-Najjar al-Futuhi** (d. 980) – A notable Egyptian Hanbali authority and the author of Muntaha al-Iradat, which were to become another widely accepted manual amongst the latter Hanbalis, along with al-Iqna’.
- **Mar’i b. Yusuf al-Karmi** (d. 1033) – A Palestinian born scholar who resided in Egypt and wrote extensively on various sciences. He is particularly remembered for making two important contributions to Hanbali Fiqh: i) Ghayat al-Muntaha, which came as a merger between the two relied-upon manuals, al-Iqna’ and Muntaha al-Iradat; and ii) Dalil al-Talib, a summarisation of Muntaha al-Iradat. This manual received various commentaries, the most famous of which is Manar al-Sabil, by Ibn Dhuwayan.
- **Mansur b. Yunus al-Buhuti** (d. 1051) An Egyptian jurist of great stature, held in much respect for his invaluable contribution to the Hanbali school. His works mostly comprise of commentaries on various manuals, such as al-Rawdh al-Murbi’, a commentary on Zad; Kashaf al-Qina’, a commentary on al-Iqna’; and a commentary on Muntaha al-Iradat. He became the centre of learning for the Hanbalis from Jerusalem, the Greater Syria and Najd.
- **‘Abd al-Baqi al-Hanbali al-Ba’li** (d.1071) – A jurist and a traditionist who received his tutelage from al-Azhar. He assumed the position of Ifta for the Hanbalis in Jerusalem, and dedicated his life to learning and teaching various sciences.
- **Ibn al-‘Imad** (d. 1089) – A Syrian-Hanbali scholar and the author of a large biographical history, known as Shadharat al-dhahab fi akhbar man dhahab, covering the Hijra years one to 1000.

- **Abu al-Mawahib al-Hanbali** (d. 1126) – A Damascan Hanbali traditionist and a leading reciter of the Quran, who wrote extensively on various topics. Due to his known piety, he would often be asked to lead the prayer for rain (Salat al-Istisqa'), as occurred in the year 1108 when Damascus was hit by a drought. Abu al-Mawahib then led the masses in prayer, beseeching Allah for rain, and his prayer was instantly answered.
- **Muhammad Al-Saffarini** (d. 1188) – A traditionist and jurist and a profound writer on various issues. He is most commonly famous for his poetic treatise on Hanbali theology called: al-Durrah al-Mudhiyah fi 'Aqd al-Firqat al-Mardhiyah, which generally falls in line with the mainstream Hanbali dogma, bar few instances. However, in his commentary, known as Lawami' al-Anwar al-Bahiyah, he often tends to contradict his poem, in agreement with the mainstream Hanbali doctrine. His poem, nevertheless, still remains popular amongst Hanbali students.
- **Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab** (d. 1206) A leading Hanbali jurist and a theologian of Najd; more notably remembered as the pioneer of the revivalist movement which began in the Arabian Peninsula, and continued to influence various Islamic movements until today. The focus of his call was to revive the true Islamic monotheism which – in Najd – had been tainted over the years with various pre-Islamic and pagan practises. After a period of persecution, he was finally triumphant, joining forces with the leader of al-Dar'iyah, Muhammad b. Su'ud (Saudi).
- **Sulaiman b. 'Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab** (d. 1233) – Grandson of Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab, who excelled in traditions, Fiqh and theology. He was brutally executed on the orders of the viceroy of Egypt, Ibrahim Pasha, by a firing squad in a graveyard. His flesh was then collected and buried.
- **Fatima bint Muhammad al-Hanbaliyah** (d. 1247) – A famous female scholar of traditions, Fiqh, an ascetic and a popular preacher. She died in Makkah and was buried in al-Mu'lla graveyard.
- **'Abdullah Aba Butain** (d. 1282) – The grand Mufti of the 13th Islamic century Najd, and an undisputable Hanbali authority on Fiqh, traditions and theology. He was also a great admirer and defender of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.
- **'Uthman b. Bishr al-Najdi** (d. 1290) – A Najdi historian and a follower of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, known for his work on history: Unwan al-Majd fi Tarikh Najd.
- **Muhammad b. Humaid al-Najdi** (d. 1295) – A Hanbali jurist, traditionist, historian, and an ardent enemy of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's followers, in spite of being a student of Aba Butain and a great admirer of Ibn Taymiyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. He is the author of al-Suhub al-Wabila 'ala Dhara'ih al-Hanabilah, which is a continuation of Dhail Tabaqat al-Hanabila of Ibn Rajab.

- **Hamad b. 'Atiq** (d. 1301) – A jurist and a judge in al-Kharaj, and then al-Aflaj, and an author of several works in theology and Fiqh.
- **Ahmad b. 'Isa al-Najdi** (d. 1329) – A jurist, traditionist, theologian, a student of Aba Butain and a passionate follower and a propagandist of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's revivalist movement. He would travel to Makkah, the centre of the Islamic world, and would often discuss theology with various scholars of the Muslim world. He managed to earn great respect from the Sharif of Makkah, who, at his encouragement, demolished all the domed-tombs in al-Mu'alla graveyard. His invaluable contributions include his two volume commentary on al-Nuniyah of Ibn al-Qayyim in theology.
- **'Abd al-Qadir b. Badran** (d. 1346) – A Damascan scholar in Fiqh, Usul al-Fiqh, theology, grammar, and a great enthusiast for Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's movement. He was initially a Shafi'i, and later, after much research and investigation decided to be a Hanbali. His invaluable contributions to the Madhab include: al-Madkhal ila Madhab al-Imam Ahmad, an all-round introduction to the Madhab; a commentary on Ibn al-Qayyim's al-Nuniyah; a commentary on a Hanbali manual on Usul, Rawdhat al-Nadhir by Ibn Qudama, and many other works.
- **Abu Bakr Khuqir** (d. 1349) – A prominent Hanbali scholar of Makkah, and a student of Ahmad b. 'Isa. He was an outspoken propagandist of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's movement, due to which he was imprisoned along with his sons, while the eldest of them died in prison. He was eventually released upon 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Su'ud's conquest of Makkah, where he was, thereafter, appointed as a Mufti for Hanbalis. His contributions mainly comprised of works and rebuttals on theological issues.
- **Ibrahim al-Duwaiyan** (d. 1353) – A jurist, traditionist, genealogist and a judge in Qasim, most notably known for his commentary on Dalil al-Talib, called Manar al-Sabil.
- **'Abd al-Rahman b. Nasir al-Sa'di** (d. 1376) – A prominent jurist, exegete, grammarian with a great interest in poetry. He contributed many works in different subjects, the most of celebrated of them: Taysir al-Karim al-Mannan in exegesis; Manhaj al-Salikin a primer in Fiqh. His students include Muhammad b. Salih al-'Uthaimin and 'Abdullah b. 'Aqil.
- **Muhammad b. Ibrahim** (d. 1389) – The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and a prominent Hanbali jurist. He played a leading role in the development of some important legal and educational institutes. His students include: Ibn Baz, Muhammad b. Abd al-Rahman al-Qasim and 'Abd Allah b. Jibrin.
- **'Abd al-Rahman b. Qasim** (d. 1392) A prominent jurist, traditionist and a theologian, who is particularly esteemed for the most valued contribution to the Islamic heritage in this age, a 35-volume Majmu' al-Fatawa of Ibn Taymiyah. His seven-volume commentary on al-Rawdh al-Murbi' has also become considerably popular amongst the latter Hanbalis.

- **‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Baz** (d. 1420) – The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia after his teacher, Muhammad b. Ibrahim, and a leading figure in the Islamic Da’wah. He was a Mujtahid in Hanbali Madhab, and was referred to by some as the leading authority on orthodox Islam (Imam Ahl al-Sunnah).
- **Muhammad b. Salih al-Uthaimin** (d. 1421) – A leading jurist, grammarian, linguist, and a popular preacher. A close and devout student of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sa’di, and a commentator on Zad al-Mustaqni’; his commentary is known as al-Sharh al-Mumti’. His students include Ahmad al-Qadhi, Khalid al-Muslih, Khalid al-Mushayqih, and many others.
- **‘Abdullah b. ‘Aqil** – A jurist and formerly chief justice in Saudi Arabia. One of the closest students of ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sa’di, who is known today as Sheikh al-Hanabilah. His close students include: Dr. al-Shibl, Haitham al-Haddad and Anas b. ‘Aqil, his grandson.
- **Bakr b. ‘Abd Allah Abu Zaid** – A jurist, traditionist, linguist and a profound author of many works. His important contributions to the Hanbali Madhab include al-Madkhal al-Mufassal ila Fiqh al-Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal, a two-volume in-depth introduction to the Madhab, which serves today as one of the main reference work on the school.

Increasing Number of Hanbalis

Historically, the Hanbali Madhab has always been known for having fewer followers comparatively to the remaining schools. Some even argued that the small number of followers was indicative of an inherent weakness of the Madhab and its lack of popularity. Hanbalis often responded with the following verse of poetry:

Yaquluna fi ashabi ahmada qillatun

Fa cultu lahum inn al-kirama qalilu

They say of Ahmad’s followers: How few they are!

Thus, I said to them: The dignified are always few

The secret behind the spread of any particular Madhab, or lack thereof, has mainly been the authorities, responsible for bestowing the Islamic courts to one faction, at the expense of the other. In a land where courts were dominated by a particular Madhab, a student qualifying in a different Madhab had no future, and consequently, was forced to migrate, or embrace the native Madhab, or conspire with fellow Madhabists to seize the courts for themselves, by any means necessary. This was one of the main reasons behind Hanafi-Shafi’i rivalry in the Islamic history, which at times led to violent clashes.

The Hanbalis, however, had an inherent tendency of declining lofty positions offered by the authorities. Hence, Abu al-Wafa Ibn 'Aqil al-Hanbali remarks that the Hanbali Madhab has been 'oppressed' by none other than Hanbalis themselves. For whenever a Hanbali would excel in knowledge, he would submerge himself in worship and gratitude to Allah, embrace the ascetic life (Zuhd) and divorce himself from fame, status and worldly life. This was also confirmed by a prominent Shafi'i traditionist and a historian, al-Dhahabi, in his book *Zaghl al-'Ilm* where he describes the Hanbalis with similar distinguishing qualities.

The Hanbalis had remained an insignificant minority, and perhaps, close to extinction, until Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhab arose in Najd forming an influential revivalist movement, with the aim to purify the true understanding of Islamic monotheism, in a society stained with pre-Islamic pagan beliefs and practices. After a period of persecution and exile, he joined forces with Muhammad b. Su'ud and successfully revived the enforcement of the much-neglected Shariah laws.

It is solely to the credit of the Wahhabist revivalist movement, that until today, the courts in the Arabian Peninsula are predominantly Hanbali, bar some areas to the south near Yemen, which still remain Shafi'i. The significance of the Wahhabist call is demonstrated in an undeniable fact that nearly all Islamic reformist movements in the 20th century, directly or indirectly, are influenced by the basic call of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Egypt, for example, apart from being the centre for Ash'ari learning, with its political life dominated by a brutal socialist-dictatorship, has been historically at odds with the followers of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab; yet, one cannot but notice that the majority of 'The Youth of Awakening' (Shabab al-Sahwah) are somewhat more inclined towards the Wahhabist thought than the dogma propagated by the local Azharites. Hence, it comes at no surprise that 'Wahhabism' has been singled out as an ideological target in the so-called 'War on Terror'.

A scant reading of the Islamic history illustrates that the Hanbalis are known for having an outstanding character, fearlessness and eagerness for enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, with Imam Ahmad setting the precedence by remaining steadfast during the inquisition. After the demise of Imam Ahmad, the Hanbalis grew stronger in Baghdad, and as Ibn 'Asakir notes, they would patrol the streets, during which, if they noticed a man with an unrelated woman, they would report him to the police; or if they noticed a musical instrument or a bottle of alcohol, they would smash it. Al-Khiraqi, who was the first Hanbali scholar to write a Fiqh manual, died after being severely beaten while attempting to combat evils in Damascus. Ibn Taymiyah would likewise patrol the streets with his students, during which, if they noticed anyone playing chess they disrupt the game; or if

they saw utensils of alcohol or musical instruments, they would smash them. Ibn Taymiyah was also greatly admired for his fearless encounter with the ruthless Mongolian invader of Damascus, Qazan; as he is also remembered for his frequent imprisonment for in defence of the orthodox doctrine.

Conclusion

If a hundred-and-fifty pages by al-Dhahabi, or over seven-hundred pages by Ibn al-Jawzi could not encompass all the details in the life of such a magnificent figure in our history, as that of Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaibani, then how can one claim to do justice in this brief twenty page introduction. The unavoidable omission of detail in such a piece, should not be considered as a disservice to the Madhab.

The enthusiastic reader with a keen interest to inquire more about Imam Ahmad is recommended to read the most comprehensive biography of Imam Ahmad by Ibn al-Jawzi called *Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad*; followed by Imam Ahmad's biography by al-Dhahabi in *Siyar al-'Alam al-Nubula*. Those seeking in-depth information about the Madhab are recommended to read the richest introduction to the Madhab by Dr. Bakr b. 'Abd Allah Abu Zaid called *al-Madkhal al-Mufassal Ila Fiqh al-Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (A detailed introduction to the jurisprudence of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal). Equally recommended is another primer, albeit not so detailed, but still unique, titled: *al-Madkhal ila Madhab al-Imam Ahmad*, by Ibn Badran al-Dimashqi. Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Sirah wal-Madhab (Ahmad ibn Hanbal – the life and the Madhab) by Sa'di Abu Jaib is similarly recommended for a devotee of the Madhab, dealing with various aspects of the life of Imam Ahmad and his Madhab not addressed in the two aforementioned introductory books.

We ask Allah to accept this effort and forgive our shortcomings, for to err is only human.